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Book Review: Nadège Ragaru,
*"Et les Juifs bulgares furent sauvés": Une histoire
des saviors sur la Shoah en Bulgarie*

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Abstract

This presentation reviews a recent book by the French historian and political scientist Nadège Ragaru, analyzing how Bulgarian society has been dealing with the fate of the Bulgarian Jews during World War II. Pressurized by its Nazi German ally to send 20,000 Bulgarian Jews to extermination camps then located in the General Government, a part of the former Republic of Poland, the Bulgarian wartime government participated in the deportation of 11,343 Jews from the territories under Bulgarian administration in Greek Thrace and Yugoslav Macedonia, while withholding, after protests by some politicians and intellectuals, the Church and a part of the Bulgarian population, from completing the number of 20,000 by sending another 8,000 Jews from Bulgaria proper. In three consecutive chapters, Ragaru discusses how the People's Courts dealt with the persecutors of the Jews, analyzes the ideological sensibilities raised by a film (a Bulgarian-

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DDR coproduction) about the deportation, and examines the use of three original short documentary shootings of the events. In the two final chapters, Ragaru deals with the relative pluralism of opinions that has been the case since the fall of the communist regime and the internationalization of the topic, especially as the tense relations with North Macedonia are concerned. Ragaru's general conclusion is that in spite of the increased preparedness to admit Bulgaria's involvement, the salvation continues to be overstated, while the complicity is smuggled away.

Keywords: Bulgaria, Jews, Holocaust, salvation, deportation.

A lot has been written already on the fate of the Bulgarian Jews during World War II. Most of these publications are full of praise for the Bulgarians who in spite of Bulgaria being an ally of Nazi Germany and in spite of persistent German pressure rescued "their" Jews from annihilation. More recent publications have also drawn attention to the fact that the Jews residing in the territories of defeated Greece and Yugoslavia, administered by Bulgaria, were nevertheless handed over to the Germans and deported to extermination camps located in the General Government, a part of the former Republic of Poland, where all but a few perished. "*Et les Juifs bulgares furent sauvés*" [And the Bulgarian Jews Were Saved], the recently published book by the French historian and political scientist Nadège Ragaru (2020), does not deal elaborately with the very historical circumstances of the salvation and the deportation of the Bulgarian Jews. The relevant facts are widely known, thanks to the publication of exhaustive collections of archival documents, memories and secondary studies. Ragaru's book focuses on the way both the salvation and the deportation have been presented in communist and post-communist Bulgarian narratives. It appears that while the salvation of the Jews has grown into an object of national pride, the deportation is smoothed over as a regrettable detail, unable to smirch the majestic picture of the salvation.

Before discussing "*Et les Juifs bulgares furent sauvés*", we should have a look at the historical circumstances of both events. The overwhelming majority of the about 50,000 Jews living in Bulgaria on the eve of World War II were descendants of Sephardic Jews who had been expelled from Spain after the Edict of Alhambra in 1492 and migrated to the Ottoman Empire, where they were welcomed by the sultans. In post-Ottoman independent Bulgaria, Jews lived more or less undisturbed until the late 1930s. In 1939, the first discriminatory measures, based on the 1935 German Nuremberg Laws, were enacted. The January 1941 Law on the Defense of the State introduced practices such as the confiscation of Jewish property,

employment restrictions, compulsory residence in special quarters and villages, labor camps, compulsory name changing (all Jews had to have identifiably Jewish names), curfews, and the wearing of the yellow star. The bill, supported by Bulgarian nationalist and right-wing organizations, many of them with outspokenly pro-Nazi sympathies, was adopted by a majority in the National Assembly. It was contested, to no avail, by the parliamentary opposition, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and a number of artists, intellectuals and well-meaning people. Later in 1941, Bulgaria formally entered the Tripartite Pact, making the country an ally of Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. German troops passed through Bulgaria on their way to Yugoslavia and Greece, but technically Bulgaria was not occupied. Neither did Bulgaria, in spite of its strong political and economic dependence on Germany, turn into a genuine fascist country.

The authoritarian regime established by Tsar Boris III and his government was meant to bridle not only the mighty (illegal) communist party, but also the increasingly influential fascist organizations. The implementation of the anti-Jewish measures, however, was fully entrusted to leading figures of these fascist organizations. Thus in August 1942, Aleksandŭr Belev, cofounder and member of the extreme nationalist Union of Warriors for the Advancement of Bulgarianness, became the head of the Commission for Jewish Questions, which was to carry out new and more severe discriminatory measures. On 22 February 1943, Belev signed a secret agreement with SS-Hauptsturmführer Theodor Dannecker, concerning the deportation of 20,000 Jews from Bulgaria to extermination camps. It was decided to start with the Jews in the Bulgarian-controlled regions in Eastern Macedonia and Western Thrace (in Greece) and in Vardar Macedonia and Eastern Serbia (in Yugoslavia). These territories had been conquered by Germany in 1941 and were occupied and administered by Bulgaria. Bulgarian historians argue that Bulgaria had no full autonomy over these territories and could not prevent the Germans from deporting the local Jews. It is true that not even Germany had formally acknowledged the Bulgarian annexation of the regions in question, but Bulgaria without any doubt considered them as integral parts of the Kingdom of Bulgaria. Although Bulgaria called the troops sent to the newly acquired territories “occupation corps”, it actually considered them to be a liberation army. With the incorporation of these territories, Bulgaria believed it had not only liberated the local Bulgarian population and enabled the Bulgarian refugees from these regions to return to their homes, but also to have realized its cherished national ideal, that is, the restoration of the Bulgarian state, created by the 1878 Treaty of San Stefano. Tsar Boris III was honored with the title Tsar Unifier (*Tsar Obединител*). In the newly acquired territories

Bulgarian legislation was fully applied. Their inhabitants, except for the Jews, were offered Bulgarian citizenship.

In March 1943, 11,343 Jews were gathered by the local Bulgarian authorities and the army, handed over to the Germans and deported to exterminations camps in the General Government (a part of the former Republic of Poland). The deportation of another 8,000 Jews from Bulgaria proper (to reach the number of 20,000) was postponed after protests by members of the National Assembly, the Bulgarian clergy, the Union of Bulgarian Writers and similar organizations. A prominent role was played by Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly Dimităr Peshev (who previously had supported the anti-Jewish measures), and the liberal politician Nikola Mushanov. A huge protest meeting took place in Sofia on 24 May 1943. Ultimately, the planned deportation of the Jews from Bulgaria proper never took place. The Bulgarian Jews “were saved”. After the communist takeover in September 1944, all anti-Semitic laws were abolished. Jewish property, confiscated in the preceding period, was restituted – to be nationalized a few years later as a communist measure to liquidate private property in general. Most Bulgarian Jews, except for those of leftist persuasion, emigrated to Israel. By the 1950s, fewer than 6,000 were left.

The salvation of the Jews in Bulgaria proper and their deportation from the newly acquired territories have raised a number of questions. One of them pertains to the – indeed rather unfathomable – role played by key political figure Tsar Boris III, which is assessed quite differently by monarchist proponents of the “old regime” and republican communists. Did the salvation of the Jews in Bulgaria proper result from the opposition offered by “bourgeois” politicians and institutions, or did the resistance of “the masses”, mobilized by the communists, turn out to be conclusive? Did not the German defeat near Stalingrad contribute much more decisively to the postponement and final cancellation of the deportation? The most important – and most thorny – issue, though, is the exact status of the newly acquired territories since it defines the scale of Bulgaria’s responsibility for the death of 11,343 Jews. Already in the first footnote after the first sentence of the “Introduction” to her book, Ragaru draws attention to this question. Was Bulgaria an “*état mi-allié, mi-satellite*”¹ (Raul Hilberg), or one of the “*alliés politiquement indépendants*”² (István Deák)? Ragaru returns to the question on page 11, asking “*comment définir le statut juridique des territoires occupés?*”³ Proceeding from the situation in France, where the Council of State (*Conseil d’État*) affirmed the responsibility of Vichy France for all

¹ ‘half ally, half satellite’, trans: Maciej Falski.

² ‘politically independent allies’ M. F.

³ ‘how to define the legal status of occupied territories?’ M. F.

administrative measures taken between 16 June 1940 and 9 August 1944, she does not seem to be inclined to negotiate Bulgaria's accountability.

Ragaru's book consists of five long chapters, describing and analyzing in a chronological order Bulgarian attitudes to the salvation and the deportation of the Bulgarian Jews. Chapter 1, "La production judiciaire d'un récit des persécutions antijuives: la genèse d'une narration héroïque" [The Judicial Production of a Narrative of Anti-Jewish Persecutions: The Origin of a Heroic Narrative], focuses on how the persecutions of the Jews were dealt with by the notorious People's Courts. Ragaru's extensive attention to the treatment of the Jews in that early stage – the Courts started their activities already in March 1944 – is fully justified. Legal procedures may indeed play a crucial role in the formation of national identity in the sense of the perception of the "national self". The Nuremberg Trials and the Eichmann Trial clearly contributed to the shaping of the German and the Jewish self-image as respectively perpetrators and victims. I could add here the role played by the trials against Belgian collaborators with the Nazis, which enabled Flemish nationalists to make many Flemings believe that the Flemish people in its entirety fell victim to "oppression" by the Belgian state.

However, while the idea of being the saviors of the Jews has become without any doubt a part of the Bulgarian self-image as bearers of an exceptional religious and ethnic tolerance, the role of the People's Courts itself is not unequivocal. Even under the communist regime, these courts were not drawn much attention to in historical surveys, and in the post-communist period they were explicitly condemned as a travesty of justice. More importantly, as Ragaru points out, they did not pronounce very severe sentences against those who participated in some way or another in the anti-Semitic outrage, at least compared to the sentences passed on the "enemies of the people". As they blamed exclusively the "fascist clique" at the head of the state during the war and acquitted "the people" of any guilt, the People's Courts contributed to the widespread Bulgarian self-perception as a nation without ethnic or religious prejudices. However, since those who maltreated the Jews occupied only a minor place in the indictment acts of the war criminals, and since the army leadership, in spite of its active participation in the deportation of the Jews, as a whole was left unpunished, one gets the impression that the main goal of the People's Courts was not so much to punish the perpetrators, but to incriminate the wartime "bourgeois" regime and to legitimize the new communist regime. The Jews were considered "*victimes parmi les autres*".⁴ The Jewish sufferings were considered to be only a part of the overall sufferings of the people

⁴ 'victims among the others' M. F.

under the fascist regime. They were overshadowed by the sufferings of the persecuted communist partisans. Most of the Jews that had not left the country after the war were communists, and they did not insist on severe sentences for anti-Semitic crimes.

However, the precarious international situation Bulgaria found itself in after the war as a former ally of defeated Nazi Germany urged the Bulgarian communist government to take a severe stand vis-à-vis the anti-Semitic aberrations of the former regime. Prosecutor Mancho Rakhaminov was well aware of this, declaring that

[p]our la première fois dans l'histoire, un gouvernement a adopté dans sa loi suprême [...] un texte spécifique grâce auquel ceux qui ont écrit et mis en œuvre une législation raciste sont déclarés criminels et passibles de poursuites et de sanctions devant un Tribunal populaire"⁵

and adding rather prematurely that for centuries to come scholars would study the procedures of the court as precious examples (Ragaru, 2020, p. 27). The separate trials for anti-Semitic crimes were supposed to give them a greater international visibility. Remembering the harsh sanctions the 1919 Treaty of Neuilly had imposed on Bulgaria, then also a former ally of defeated Germany, the new Bulgarian government did its utmost to make a good impression on the International Control Commission, monitoring the denazification and the restoration of democracy in the country. The limited attention paid to the persecution of the Jews in the newly acquired territories and the emphasis on the salvation of the Jews in Bulgaria proper should be understood in this light.

On the other hand, the role of those politicians who had resisted the German insistence on deportation was greatly ignored. Even worse, both Nikola Mushanov and Dimităr Peshev were sentenced to imprisonment (albeit soon liberated). They fell victim to the communist policy of minimizing the role of "bourgeois" politicians and avoiding to acknowledge any individual "heroes" in relation to the salvation of the Jews. Obviously, there could be only one hero, the Bulgarian people, represented by the best of its sons and daughters: the communist partisans.

The salvation of the Bulgarian Jews has been the subject of a number of Bulgarian literary works and documentary and feature films. Understandably, the deportation of the Jews from the newly acquired territories has been less popular a theme. In Chapter 2, "La deportation des Juifs du Belomorie à l'écran: négocier une lecture 'socialiste' de la guerre" [The

⁵ '[...] for the first time in history, a government adopted in a supreme law [...] a specific regulation/provision whereby the people who drafted and implemented racist legislation are declared criminals and are liable for prosecution before the People's Court and can be punished' M. F.

Deportation of Jews from Belomorje on the Screen: Negotiating the ‘Socialist’ Interpretation of the War], Ragaru discusses the remarkable case of a movie coproduced by Bulgaria and East Germany (or the DDR), in which the deportation plays a crucial part. Ragaru’s discussion offers not only a look at the Bulgarian and East German way of coping with the Nazi past, but also a glance behind the curtains of the Bulgarian and East German state film studios. *Zvezdi/Sterne*, directed by Konrad Wolf and Anzhel Vagenshtajn, was released in 1959 and that same year awarded at the Film Festival in Cannes. It was internationally praised as the first German movie showing the fate of the Jews during World War II.

From Ragaru’s analysis, it transpires that, in spite of being a coproduction, *Zvezdi/Sterne* was a German movie in the first place. The central protagonists are two German soldiers, Kurt and Walter, escorting a number of Jews (who typically play a passive role) from Greece to Auschwitz. The plot unfolds in a small town in Bulgaria where they have halted. While Kurt represents a typical Nazi, Walter is of a more contemplative, sensitive and artistic nature. He falls in love with the Jewish girl Ruth (played by a Bulgarian actress), brings her medicines, which he receives from Bulgarian partisans, and even plans to help her escape. However, Kurt interferes and Walter’s plan is foiled. Thereupon Walter decides to help smuggling weapons to the Bulgarian partisans. Together with the other Jews, Ruth is deported to an extermination camp.

Ragaru examines the divergences of views between the Bulgarian and the German scenarists and directors, the comments of the critics, and the judgments of the authorities. The quarrels resulted in a number of consecutive changes made to the scenario, revealing the many sensitivities and precautions related to the subject. Abiding by the DDR policy to blame only West Germany for the Nazi past, the DDR film producers’ major concern consisted in discrediting West Germany, embodied in Kurt, as the heir of Nazi Germany, while claiming the existence of “humane” Germans as Walter, representing the DDR. What interests us here in the first place are the Bulgarian apprehensions, though.

Different aspects of the depiction of the deportation in the film were considered likely to cast a stain on the Bulgarian self-image of the saviors of the Jews. The Bulgarian coproducers required the relations between Germans and Bulgarians not to be presented as too friendly since this would create the impression that Bulgaria was not occupied, but acted as a German ally. The image of Bulgaria being occupied implied it had lost its capacity to make autonomous decisions; consequently, the deportation of the Jews was a German initiative, in which the Bulgarians had been coerced to participate. In the film, the Bulgarian complicity was shuffled

off, whence the thirty Bulgarian policemen convoying the Jews in the original scenario disappeared from the final version. The Bulgarian side also complained that the famous salvation of the Jews was not shown in a sufficiently explicit way. The role of the partisans was understated and there were no Jewish communists among the partisans. Although the scenario had been adapted incessantly to the requirements of the Bulgarian authorities, the final result was not judged suitable to be shown in Bulgarian movie theaters. The Bulgarians had access to the movie only after the award in Cannes made it impossible to hide it any longer.

Chapter 3, “La déportation des Juifs des territoires occupés: les mystérieux voyages d’une archive de 1943” [The Deportation of Jews from the Occupied Territories: Mysterious Journeys of the Records of 1943], deals with the fate of three short reels of the deportation of the Jews, kept in the Bulgarian National Film Library, in Germany and in the United States. They show Jews bearing their luggage, walking or waiting in the streets, Jews on trucks or in trains, and Jews embarking on a boat in the town of Lom. Convoying Bulgarian policemen can be seen as well. Ragaru devotes many pages to find out who filmed these scenes and where and why they were shot, without succeeding in giving conclusive answers to any of these questions. The fragments emerged for the first time in 1968 during the trial in Germany against Adolf-Heinz Beckerle, the German plenipotentiary minister to Bulgaria, who played a crucial part in the implementation of the secret agreement of 22 February 1943. While it is obvious why the images had been kept hidden, it is less obvious why the Bulgarian authorities – reluctantly – agreed to make them public. Plausible reasons, according to Ragaru, might have been the supportive attitude of the Soviet Union towards the trial, the idea that blaming Beckerle might help decriminalizing the Bulgarians and might offer another opportunity to blame Tsar Boris III, and the wish to challenge the monopoly of Zionist historiography, which was traditionally benevolent toward the tsar.

What makes for compelling reading is Ragaru’s analysis of how these images were ultimately used not to illustrate the complicity of the Bulgarians, but to highlight the salvation of the Jews. They showed what might have happened to the Jews if the Bulgarian people, led by the heroic partisans, had not successfully thwarted the criminal intentions of the Nazis and the Bulgarian fascist puppet government. From the end of the 1970s onward, in the margin of the nationalist policy of party leader Todor Zhivkov’s daughter Liudmila Zhivkova, the story of the salvation of the Jews gradually became an integral part of the Bulgarian great national narrative. A number of publications, exhibitions, documentary and feature films were devoted to the subject. However, following the tradition

launched by the People's Courts, credit for the salvation of the Jews was given entirely to the communists and "the people", while the deportation of the Jews from the newly acquired territories continued to be blamed on the Germans. The Bulgarian participation was minimized or concealed. Party leader Todor Zhivkov, who was claimed to have been the organizer of the great manifestation in defense of the Jews on 24 May 1943, declared that "Jews in Bulgaria had died as partisans and political prisoners, but never because of their being Jews", which was true only on the condition that the newly acquired territories were not taken into consideration. In 1988, the Bulgarian authorities organized a huge international conference on the salvation of the Jews. Through translations of Bulgarian publications, the diffusion of documentary movies and the organization of exhibitions at home and abroad, Bulgaria successfully propagated her interpretation of the facts.

Ragaru rightly draws attention to a particular political aspect of the Bulgarian propaganda campaign. The salvation of the Jews was supposed to confirm the innate tolerance towards ethnic and religious minorities that Bulgarians traditionally demonstrate. However, in the same period, the 1980s, Bulgaria launched the notorious "regeneration process": it forced its Turkish minority to change their Turkish (Muslim) names to Bulgarian ones, closed mosques and banned the use of the Turkish language, the wearing of Turkish national costumes, the practicing of Muslim traditions, and so on, in an obvious attempt to "Bulgarize" it. Finally, in 1989, it expelled about 340,000 Turks to Turkey – an outrage that, unlike in the case of what had happened in 1943, provoked no noticeable protests among the Bulgarian population; only a few intellectuals expressed their indignation. In fact, protests were organized *after* 1989, when the post-communist government announced the restoration of the Turkish minority rights. The salvation of the Jews was invoked to prove to the public abroad that the Bulgarians were nevertheless a tolerant people. An article in *The New York Times* (17 April 1988), reviewing a film that "tells how a Nazi ally saved its 50,000 Jews", quoted the Bulgarian ambassador to the United States, who explained that "*la longue histoire de souffrance de mon pays sous l'Empire ottoman a rendu les Bulgares empathiques envers les opprimés*"⁶ (Ragaru, 2020, p. 215). The sufferings caused by the forefathers of the victims of the "regeneration process" were referred to as an explanation for the Bulgarians' ethnic tolerance towards the Jews – and, implicitly, as an excuse for the treatment of the Turkish minority at the time.

Chapter 4, "Négocier une juste présence du 'sauvetage' et des dépor-

⁶ 'the long history of the suffering of my country under the Ottoman rule made Bulgarians empathic towards the oppressed' M. F.

tations: les controversies mémorielles d'après-1989" [Negotiating a Proper Presence of 'Salvation' and Deportations: Memory Controversies after 1989], deals with the relative pluralism of opinions that emerged after the fall of the communist regime in 1989. Critical, overwhelmingly Jewish voices could now be heard, drawing attention to the anti-Semitic measures taken by the Bulgarian government as soon as 1939, the deportation of the Jews from the newly acquired territories, the Stalinist anti-Semitic campaign in Bulgaria in the early 1950s, the circumstances of the massive Jewish emigration to Israel and so on. The official organization of the Bulgarian Jews under communist rule was criticized for expressing "*ad nauseam*" its gratitude to the Bulgarian Communist Party for their salvation. Although the salvation continued to be overstated and the deportation to be downplayed (*sauvetage surexposé, déportation invisibilisée*)⁷ (Ragaru, 2020, p. 227), some discussions nevertheless were important as they focused on a revision of various "historical truths" and reflected new political currents in Bulgarian society.

Old questions could now be discussed without ideological constraints. Was Bulgaria occupied during World War II? Did it enter an alliance with Nazi-Germany, and if so, did it act on its own free will or under pressure of the circumstances? Was the Bulgarian wartime regime fascist or not? Were the early anti-Semitic measures imposed by the Nazis or did the Bulgarians take the initiative themselves? Was the salvation of the Jews the merit of the Bulgarian people, embodied in the Communist Party, or did it result from the personal courage of politicians, church leaders, intellectuals, briefly the "bourgeois elite", and ultimately Tsar Boris III? The answers to these questions had a high political relevance. The major opposition party, the Union of Democratic Forces, working for a rehabilitation of Peshev, Mushanov and (partly) the tsar, tended to be identified with the fascist regime by its (former communist, now socialist) opponents, while the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the heir of the Bulgarian Communist Party, faced a threat of being deprived of its leading role in the salvation of the Jews. When they prided themselves on it, the socialists were reminded of the "regeneration process" they had organized "when they were still communists". However, when all was said and done, the focus of the quarrels remained on who saved the Jews, rather than on who was responsible for the deportation.

Chapter 5, "Des disputes fécondes? Mobilisations transnationales et institutionnalisation d'un espace de dissensus" [Fruitful Discussions? Transnational Mobilizations and Institutionalization of the Space of Dissensus], deals with current developments. In the first place, Ragaru

⁷ 'overexposed salvation, invisible deportation' M. F.

mentions the publication of an impressive quantity of unknown or previously inaccessible primary sources. Initially, they mainly illustrated the salvation of the Bulgarian Jews, but there was also the monumental collection, compiled by Nadia Danova and Rumen Avramov, of all official Bulgarian documents pertaining to the deportation of the Jews from Greek and Yugoslav Macedonia. Bulgarian “official historiography” had lost its monopoly over the national narrative, including the story of the “salvation” and the “deportation”. The official narrative is increasingly complemented with – and challenged by – accounts of eyewitnesses, collected by anthropologists who proceed from different points of view. Simultaneously, the fate of the Jews in wartime Bulgaria is thematized by informal groups defending human rights, minority rights and freedom of speech. Finally, the topic has also become internationalized. Discussions related in some way or another to the Bulgarian Jews during World War II are now conducted in the European Union and the United States. All this has contributed to an undeniably growing, though still hesitant and often reluctant preparedness in Bulgarian society to acknowledge the complicity in the deportation of the Macedonian and Thracian Jews.

A factor particularly irritating to the Bulgarians is the narrative on the Macedonian Jews as developed in what is now the Republic of North Macedonia. As long as the Republic of Macedonia was a part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Skopje paid little attention to the fate of the Jews. Like in Bulgaria, the interest was limited mainly to the Jewish partisans. After North Macedonia gained independence in 1991, the Jews were increasingly included in the polemics between Bulgarian and Macedonian historians and politicians about the ethnic identity of the Slavic population of Macedonia. According to the Macedonians, the Jews in Northern Macedonia thought of themselves as Macedonian Jews and identified themselves with the Macedonian people. Like the Bulgarians, who, according to the Bulgarian ambassador to the United States, as a result of their sufferings under the “Ottoman yoke”, felt a particular empathy for the oppressed Jews, so “[l]e peuple macédonien”,⁸ according to a Macedonian politician, “est le peuple qui comprend le mieux le sort des Juifs parce qu’il a une expérience historique similaire, ayant été soumis à la destruction biologique et nationale”⁹ (Ragaru, 2020, p. 303). Thus the deportation of the Jews by the Bulgarian occupation corps was represented as an event uniting Jews and Macedonians as victims of the Bulgarians. A Holocaust Museum that was intended to publicize the persecutions of the Macedonian Jews by

⁸ ‘the Macedonian nation’ M. F.

⁹ ‘is the nation that understands the fate of the Jews the best because of its similar historical experience, having been exposed to biological and national destruction’ M. F.

the Bulgarians, to emphasize the Macedonian identity of the Jewish victims, and to expose the Bulgarian responsibility, opened its doors in 2011. (It should be noted that the deportation of the Macedonian Jews hardly met any resistance from the local population, be it Bulgarian or Macedonian.) In 2012, a Macedonian movie, *Treto poluvreme* (*The Third Half*), telling another love story involving a Jewish woman during Bulgarian occupation, raised the anger of the Bulgarian members of the European Parliament, who declared that the film, omitting the salvation of the Jews, created a one-sided and hostile picture of Bulgaria.

These confrontations should be understood in the context of more important discussions going on in the European Union about the lustration of former communist party members. While Poland, Hungary and Romania tend to equal communist and fascist crimes against humanity, in Bulgaria many share the (Soviet) view that, roughly, since the Red Army defeated Nazi Germany, criticizing communism boils down to defending fascism. Those rejecting the communist past were accused of sympathizing with the fascist regime that persecuted the Jews, while the communists, having rescued them, presented themselves as genuine antifascists and “real Europeans”.

A factor damaging the Bulgarian self-perception as saviors of the Jews is the recent rise of anti-Semitism in Bulgaria. The legal measures against anti-Semitism adopted by the National Assembly in 2017, as a matter of fact, were supported by the three “patriotic” parties which Ragaru sarcastically labels “*la fine fleur du nationalism bulgare*”¹⁰ (Ragaru, 2020, p. 330). However, the ultranationalist and xenophobic marches (which are forbidden by law), named after the murdered pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic wartime general Khristo Lukov, continue to attract many people, most of them radicalized members of these “patriotic” parties. Especially Volen Siderov, leader of the far-right political party Ataka, openly voices his anti-Semitism, to be sure, in a total package with vigorous anti-Muslim and anti-Western rhetoric.

My presentation of “*Et les Juifs bulgares furent sauvés*” offers only a meager impression of Ragaru’s outstanding book, which is so extraordinarily rich not only in related facts, but also as far as moral implications are concerned. Ragaru uses an impressive amount of various sources (documents, movies, radio and television interviews, personal interviews and so on) that thoroughly substantiate her line of argument and support her conclusions. I particularly admire her clinical “close reading” of the sources, the penetrating discourse analyses, the ability to contextualize the sources and to fathom their hidden, wanted and unwanted implications. Her book

¹⁰ ‘the fine flower of Bulgarian nationalism’ M. F.

probably has not said the last word about the treatment of the salvation and deportations of the Jews in Bulgarian society, but there remains little to be added indeed.

It is a laudable feature of every important book that it leaves the reader with a number of questions and reflections the author (consciously?) did not explicitly or conclusively deal with. Thus, even if external factors played a decisive role, all Bulgarians – be they the tsar, the clerics, “bourgeois” or leftist politicians, intellectuals or artists, ordinary people, partisans – who, moved by feelings of humanity, contributed to the rescue of the Jews, deserve our admiration. However, the use of the narrative of the salvation merely to boast national pride or to construct a self-flattering image of ethnic and religious tolerance, while feelings of sincere humane solidarity and compassion play only a secondary role, is less likely to be received with much acclaim. The idea that it is preferable for Bulgaria to acknowledge on its own initiative its responsibility for the deportation before being accused of it by others, if inspired solely by tactical considerations about the country’s international reputation, from a moral point of view is hardly any better. For a nation that rightly takes pride in the achievements of its ancestors, it is appropriate without restraints also to admit the wrong they did – an attitude that admittedly only a few nations are mature enough to take. The crucial and most painful question, however, remains whether the prospect of achieving some national ambitions can ever justify the collaboration with a murderous and by all means despicable regime as that of the Nazis – all the more so if the price to be paid turns out to be complicity in genocide. Certainly, the Bulgarians are not the only nation in Europe that has to cope with these qualms contemplating its wartime past. So do the Croats, the Slovaks, the Ukrainians, the Flemings and others that have a history of collaboration with the Nazis. Nationalism is a poisoned source of moral values.

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Dit recente boek van de Franse historica en politieke wetenschapster Nadège Ragaru analyseert de manier waarop de Bulgaarse samenleving is omgegaan met het lot van de Bulgaarse Joden gedurende de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Onder druk van haar Nazi-Duitse bondgenoot om 20.000 Bulgaarse Joden naar uitroeiingskampen toen gesitueerd in het Generaal-Gouvernement, een deel van de voormalige Republiek Polen te sturen nam de Bulgaarse regering deel aan de deportatie van 11.343 Joden uit de territoria in Grieks Thracië en Joegoslavisch Macedonië onder Bulgaars bestuur, maar zag, na protesten van enkele politici en intellectuelen, de kerk en een deel van de Bulgaarse bevolking, af van de uitlevering van het resterende aantal van 8.000 Joden uit Bulgarije zelf. In drie opeenvolgende hoofdstukken, Ragaru beschrijft hoe de Volksrechtbanken omgingen met de vervolgers van de Joden, welke ideologische gevoeligheden werden opgeroepen door een film (een Bulgaars-Oost-Duitse coproductie) over de deportatie, en het gebruik dat gemaakt werd van drie originele korte documentaire filmfragmenten over de gebeurtenissen. In de laatste twee hoofdstukken behandelt Ragaru de relatieve verscheidenheid aan opinie na de val van het communistische regime en de internationalisering van het onderwerp, in het bijzonder in verband met de relaties met de Republiek van Noord-Macedonië. Haar algemene conclusie luidt dat, ondanks te toenemende bereidheid om de betrokkenheid van Bulgarije te erkennen, de redding toch overbelicht blijft, terwijl de medeplichtigheid wordt weggemoffeld.

Sleutelwoorden: Bulgarije, Joden, Holocaust, redding, deportatie.

Nadège Ragaru,
*“Et les Juifs bulgares furent sauvés”: Une histoire des
saviors sur la Shoah en Bulgarie.*

Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2020

Nadège Ragaru, francuska historyczka i politolożka, w swej najnowszej książce analizuje, w jaki sposób społeczeństwo bułgarskie traktowało bułgarskich Żydów w czasie II wojny światowej. Rząd Bułgarii, ulegając

naciskom swego sojusznika, nazistowskich Niemiec, w sprawie wysłania dwudziestu tysięcy bułgarskich Żydów do obozów Zagłady w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie, wcześniej Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, deportował 11 343 Żydów z terytoriów greckiej Tracji i jugosłowiańskiej Macedonii, znajdujących się wówczas pod rządami władz Bułgarii. Jednak po protestach nielicznych polityków, intelektualistów i Cerkwi oraz części bułgarskiej ludności władze Bułgarii ostatecznie odstąpiły od procedury wydalenia z kraju pozostałych 8 000 Żydów. W trzech kolejnych rozdziałach Ragaru opisuje, jak Trybunały Ludowe traktowały prześladowców Żydów, jaką podatność na ideologię wśród społeczeństwa bułgarskiego ukazała filmowa koprodukcja bułgarsko-enerdowska o deportacjach, a także wyjaśnia, do czego posłużyły trzy krótkie oryginalne fragmenty filmów dokumentalnych ukazujące tamte wydarzenia. W ostatnich dwóch rozdziałach Ragaru przedstawia różnorodność opinii po upadku reżimu komunistycznego oraz internacjonalizację tematu, w szczególności kwestię stosunków z Republiką Północnej Macedonii. Autorka wysnuwa ogólny wniosek, że mimo przejawiającej się skłonności Bułgarii do uznania swego zaangażowania [w Zagładę], kwestia ocalenia Żydów [przez społeczeństwo bułgarskie] jest nadal bardziej eksponowana, a współsprawstwo jest wciąż zamykane pod dywan.

Słowa kluczowe: Bułgaria, Żydzi, Holocaust, ocalenie, deportacja.

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Note

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